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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8414
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/02/2018

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MAIN OPPOSITION AND MUSLIM CONGRESS
JOIN FORCES FOR EASTERN ELECTIONS; HAKEEM RESIGNS AS MP;
POLL DATE POSSIBLY DELAYED

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (U) On April 1, the Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and Rauff Hakeem's Sri Lankan Muslim Congress agreed to contest the Eastern Provincial Council elections jointly in all three eastern districts - Ampara, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa. SLMC General Secretary Hasan Ali said the SLMC would field 9 candidates in each district and the UNP would field the rest. The UNP reportedly has agreed to field several Muslim candidates. Local press reported that both parties had agreed to run under the UNP's elephant symbol and would decide on a candidate for the Chief Minister post after the elections. SLMC Batticaloa strongman MLAM Hisbullah and Batticaloa Pradeshiya Sabha Chairman Mohamed Tausiq, however, have crossed over to the government's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Hisbullah said he joined the UPFA at the request of Muslim religious leaders, and implied that he would be the government's candidate for Chief Minister.

¶2. (C) On April 2, Sri Lankan media reported that Hakeem and three other SLMC members of parliament have resigned from their seats to run in the provincial council elections in the East. Indian Deputy High Commissioner Manickam confirmed the story and told Ambassador that Hakeem will run for the Chief Ministership. Manickam said Hakeem had a good chance of winning and speculated that this development would likely prompt the government to delay the elections. British High Commissioner Hayes reported that Presidential Chief of Staff Lalith Weeratunga told him on April 1 that the elections had already been postponed from May 10 to May 24.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Hakeem, Sri Lanka's most prominent Muslim leader, has now come full circle, having moved from the opposition benches to government minister, now to become the government's chief political rival in the East. We concur with Manickam that Hakeem poses a serious threat to the government's game plan. It will be interesting to see what reason the GSL advances if it chooses to delay the election. The government has maintained consistently that security arrangements were adequate. At this point, a postponement on

security grounds would be an embarrassment, raising questions among the public as to whether the government is only committed to the sort of free and fair elections it knows it can win.

BLAKE